THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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PRESS RELEASE

May 23, 1989

LOST JAPANESE ART OF THE BENSHI TO LIVE IN FILM SERIES AT MUSEUM

The forgotten Japanese art of the benshi, or live film narrator, will be revived in two special showings of rare Japanese silent films at The Cleveland Museum of Art. The series is entitled "The Benshi Tradition in the Japanese Silent Film." On Sunday, June 4, the Museum will present **Orochi** (1925), a period swordplay film with a recorded narration (translated in English subtitles) by the late master benshi Shunsui Matsuda. And on Wednesday, June 7, Japan's foremost living benshi, Ms. Midori Sawato, will deliver a live narration (with recorded music) to Kenji Mizoguchi's masterful 1933 romantic melodrama **The Water Magician**. Although Ms. Sawato's narration will be in Japanese, the film has English subtitles. Admission to both events is free.

The benshi played a critical role during the silent film era in Japan. Standing at the side of the screen, the benshi provided a running commentary to all films. In a typical performance, the benshi did character voices, explained the plot, and otherwise commented on the details or action of the movie. Their role was similar to that of storytellers and narrators in traditional Japanese theatre, and they frequently became bigger attractions than the stars of the movies they were narrating. The institution of the benshi also delayed the coming of sound pictures in Japan.

But when sound did arrive, the benshi disappeared. Shunsui Matsuda, the narrator of **Orochi**, devoted his life to the preservation of silent films and to the practice of this art that was so abruptly lost. When he died in 1987, his disciple, Midori Sawato, carried on the tradition. Ms. Sawato makes her American debut during this current tour, which is taking her to New York and Berkeley, in addition to Cleveland.

These special programs are presented in collaboration with Matsuda Eiga-sha, Kawakita Memorial Film Institute, Japan Society, the American Museum of the Moving Image, and the Pacific Film Archive, with partial funding from The Japan Foundation.

Sunday, June 4 at 2:15 p.m.

Orochi, Japan, 1925. Directed by Fumitaro Futagawa. Silent with music track and recorded narration by Shunsui Matsuda. English subtitles. 75 min.

Wednesday, June 7 at 7:45 p.m.

The Water Magician, Japan, 1933. Directed by Kenji Mizoguchi. Silent with recorded music and live narration by Midori Sawato. English subtitles. 98 min.

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